

A £300,000 gift: how readers' generosity has made a difference in the past year

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Published: 04 December 2007

Last year's Independent appeal focused on helping the victims of conflict, political turmoil and natural disaster; innocents swept up in the troubles. Almost £300,000 was raised by readers for charities working with children, the disabled and the elderly, and all those who had no way to escape the destruction that visited their lives.

Merlin, a British medical charity that provides emergency aid to areas affected by war or natural disasters, used its share of the money for a range of urgent projects, including improving medical services in war-torn Gaza and responding to the floods in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Uganda.

"For us, the money meant we were able to help particularly in places that hadn't hit the headlines, or had been forgotten," said Merlin's chief executive, Carolyn Miller. "We could never have responded so quickly to events without The Independent appeal funds, and if you have to hang around and wait for funding then you lose the impact of what you're able to do."

For women like Saima, a 34-year-old living in Battis Mori village, southern Pakistan, Merlin provided hope for a better future. Saima, who had already suffered five miscarriages, lost her first child to malnutrition in the floods which devastated the region. Now, with the help of antenatal care from a Merlin mobile medical team, she says she is "happy", and feeling much healthier in this pregnancy than her previous ones.

For another of The Independent's 2006 charities, Anti-Slavery International, the appeal donations meant it could lobby and provide for another group whose lives had been taken out of their control; the victims of human trafficking.

Anti-Slavery International's director, Aidan McQuade, said: "The appeal particularly helped us to take advantage of the opportunities presented in the bicentenary year [marking the abolition of the slave trade] to make real progress in the fight against slavery."

The third of the appeal charities, Welfare Association, provided emergency medical supplies for Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza and fuel for its ambulances and began a new schools health programme with 40 primary schools in the West Bank and Gaza that will improve the health of 25,000 young children there.

Welfare Association

The funds raised enabled WA to support the health and educational needs of young children, in a new programme to improve children's health in primary schools in Palestine. 30% of these children suffer from anxiety, phobia or depression from witnessing violent scenes of conflict on a daily basis, children are malnourished and 50% have anaemia due to the collapsing local economy and low family incomes. And through lack of central funding to schools, children are not receiving basic health checks e.g. sight, hearing and dental checks. This project will support all these needs and with each school's environmental committee will improve facilities such as schools' kitchens, toilets and first aid stations.

Merlin

When Cyclone Yemyin devastated southern Pakistan in June this year, Merlin's response team was on hand to bring an emergency health clinic to the village of Kot Magsi. Eighty-five people attended the clinic on its first day of operation, and as news of Merlin's presence spread, more people started arriving. Six months on, thousands of people still live in basic shelters with poor sanitation conditions, and Merlin now has a nine-strong team to help them in Balochistan. In Gaza, Merlin has bolstered existing health services and aid to those prematurely removed from wards. Three mobile clinics have also been set up in the West Bank.

Anti-Slavery International

The money helped this lobbying charity make significant progress last year. The British Government signed the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings in March – due to come into force next year. Also, a UN special rapporteur has been created to report on instances of slavery around the world. Its lobbying even reached countries with poor human rights records. In Mauritania, President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi finally acknowledged that slavery continued within its borders, and passed legislation to criminalise it.